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ABSTRACT

Communication competence has been approached primarily from three perspectives in the communication literature: (1) as cognitive understanding of communication, (2) as a capability of performing certain communication skills, and (3) as achieving effective communication. Most scholars who write about communication competence view competence either as a trait or as situation-bound. Neither view is right or wrong. However, a preferable view is one that looks at communication competence on a continuum from the extreme "traitist" perspective to the extreme "situationalist" perspective. There are at least four identifiable points along that continuum: (1) trait-like communication competence, representing those who are competent in communication across contexts, receivers, and time; (2) context-based communication competence, representing those who are competent in communication within a given type of context across receivers and time; (3) receiver-based communication competence, representing those who are competent in communication within a given receiver or group of receivers across contexts and time; and (4) situational communication competence, representing those who are competent in a given context, with a given receiver or group of receivers, at a specific time. These provide several very different, yet potentially very useful, vantage points from which one may approach this area of study. (HOD)

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A TRAIT PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

James C. McCroskey

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A TRAIT PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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About five years ago, after reading a number of papers and articles related to communication competence in preparation for teaching a unit in this area to my graduate class, I became highly frustrated with what I saw as naive and confused conceptualizations being advanced by writers in the field. I took my frustration out on my typewriter and the result was a paper which I presented at this convention in 1981 and subsequently published (McCroskey, 1981; 1982b). That paper generated a goodly amount of comment and caused at least a few people to rethink their conceptualizations of the communication competence construct. More recently I have somewhat refined and expanded on these views (McCroskey, 1984b).

I do not plan to take your time today with a lengthy restatement of the positions I took in the original paper or the book chapter which followed. Suffice to say, I have not changed my mind and the paper is there for you to read if you choose. Rather, I plan to take my alloted time to build on those ideas with particular attention to distinguishing between trait and situational perspectives on communication competence and the implications of both for research and pedagogy. Before I do that, however, it is necessary to summarize the three primary perspectives on communication competence which I see emerging from the literature.

Perspectives on the Nature of Communication Competence

Communication competence has been approached from primarily three perspectives in the communication literature: 1) as cognitive understanding of communication, 2) as a capability of performing certain communication skills, and 3) as achieving effective communication. Let us examine each of these in turn.

Comptence as Cognitive Understanding. Communication competence from this perspective does not imply that an individual will actually communicate in

competent ways. Rather, to be communicatively competent an individual must "demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate communicative behavior in a given situation" (Larson, Backlund, Redmond, & Barbour, 1978). Such knowledge may, of course, be inferred from actual observation of the person's communication behavior. However, such behavioral observation is not mandated by this perspective. The knowledge could also be demonstrated by selecting appropriate behaviors from a group of possible behaviors on a written examination, for example.

While relatively few writers have restricted their examinations of communication competence to this perspective, this may be a predominant perspective in communication pedagogy. All but the most narrowly skills-based courses in communication do involve written examinations in which students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge of appropriate communicative behaviors. Most communication courses, particularly those beyond the introductory level, rely on such examinations and other written projects required of students for grading. Such grading is at least a crude estimate of the individual's competence in the particular area of communication covered by the course.

Competence as Skill Performance. Communication competence from this perspective holds that knowing the appropriate behavior is not enough, one must actually perform the behavior (Allen & Brown, 1976). To be able to judge an individual as communicatively competent, one must be able to observe the person engaging in appropriate communication behavior. No matter how much knowledge about communication a person might demonstrate on an examination, to be judged as competent the person must demonstrate the ability to perform the communicative skills the observer believes are representative of competent communication.

This perspective is taken by many professionals in the field of communication, particularly those who believe that skills are the basis of the

communication field. The Communication Competency Assessment Instrument developed by Rebecca B. Rubin is representative of this view. Many of our basic communication courses, particularly those which focus on public speaking, are taught from this perspective. A student is judged as a competent communicator if he/she can perform the particular skills taught in the class.

Competence as Effectiveness. This is the most demanding of the perspectives on communication competence. It requires that the individual not only perform appropriate behaviors but also that such performance leads to the accomplishment of the individual's goals in the communication encounter. As Wiemann (1977, p. 198) puts it, communication competence is

> the ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he (she) may successfully accomplish his (her) own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his (her) fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation.

This perspective probably is the least useful for pedagogical purposes currently. While developing tests to measure knowledge of appropriate communication and observational techniques to measure performance skills are not simple, such development is within the capabilities of most teachers as well as researchers. Methods of determining effectiveness, particularly in a classroom setting, are quite another matter. Recent research by Powers and Lowry (1984a; 1984b), however, shows great promise for breaking through this measurement barrier. The technique they have developed can be used by both researchers and teachers and other techniques are likely to be generated modeled on their approach.

While scholars may take varying perspectives on the nature of communication competence, lay persons seem to have little difficulty with the construct. In a sample of 78 students at the beginning of an undergraduate basic course, for

example, I found none who had difficulty defining "communication competence." All but a few subscribed to the competence-as-effectiveness perspective. Typical of the responses I obtained was "That is when a person can get his point across to someone else."

Important to our discussion here, most of the respondents made comments which suggested competence is a trait of a person. However, several of the respondents took note of situational constraints which might be present. Representative of the latter group was the following comment: "Communication competence is being able to communicate as much as you can, considering the person you are talking to."

Communication Competence: Trait versus Situation

Like the students in my sample above, most scholars who write about communication competence can divided into two groups--those who view competence as a trait and those who envision it as situation-bound. This is a very important distinction, for the position one takes will determine the nature of the research one is likely to pursue and the pedagogy one is likely to practice. Let us take a look at each of these views.

The Trait View. This view essentially holds that people, not behaviors, are competent. A competent communicator will behave competently in a wide variety of communication situations, including situations which the individual has never encountered previously. An incompetent communicator, on the other hand, will behave incompetently in a wide variety of communication situations, even in situations with which the individual has had extensive experience.

This view permits personality-based explanations of communication competence, although it does not demand them. For example, it can be argued that people may be more competent because they are assertive, Machiavellian, rhetorically sensitive, versatile, empathic, or androgynous. Whatever the

reason, personality or otherwise, competent communication is seen as emanating regularly from some individuals and not from others. This view suggests both competent and incompetent communicators can learn how to be more competent, but competent communicators are prone to choose appropriate and/or effective communication behaviors in the absence of such training much more so than are incompetent communicators. The view does not, however, preclude the incompetent communicator from ever becoming competent--he or she will simply need more training.

Most people who take this view of communication competence tend to reject the idea that there are specific sets of appropriate behaviors for specific situations. Rather, they see a wide variety of behaviors as being appropriate in any given situation. In short, not all competent communicators behave the same way in the same situation, but they may still be equally effective.

The Situational View. This view essentially holds that behaviors, not people, are competent. A person, therefore, may behave competently in one situation and incompetently in another situation.

People who take this view typically reject personality-based explanations of communication competence. While they may judge a person to be situationally competent because the person engages in competent behavior in one situation, they do not suggest the person will be competent in another setting. They do, however, suggest that another person engaging in the same behaviors in a similar setting will also be competent.

Although the trait and situational views in large measure represent polarized opposites, they both view training as an effective means of increasing communication competence. The training each might recommend, however, is likely to be substantially different. The traitist would be more likely to recommend broad, generalized training in communication. In contrast, the situationist

would be more likely to recommend specific situational skills training.

An Integrative Position

If I were forced to choose between the views of the traitists and those of the situationists, I would come down on the side of the traitists. I would do that not from some deep scholarly insight but rather from simply observing people around me. I know far more people who are competent or incompetent communicators in most of their life experiences than I do people who are competent in some situations and incompetent in others. But I do know some of the latter type, so I am pleased I am not forced to make such a choice. Fortunately, no one else need make such a choice either, although many seem to think they must.

Like the blind men and the elephant, traitists and situationists disagree on the nature of this beast because they are looking at different ends of it. Neither the traitist nor the situationist view is right, nor is either wrong. Rather, each presents us part of the picture while neither presents us with the whole picture. Indeed there are people who are more communicatively competent than others. There are also communication behaviors that are more competent than others for any given situation.

This controversy between trait and situational views of communication competence reminds me of a very similar conflict between people studying communication apprehension. Some prefer to view communication apprehension as a trait-like characteristic of an individual. Others prefer to view the phenomonon as an individual's response to a given communication situation. I have argued elsewhere (McCroskey, 1982a; 1984a) that this is a false and needless dichotomy which has only served to confuse and impeed research in the area. I believe the same thing is true for the dichotomy in communication competence research. I prefer to look at communication competence on a continuum from the extreme traitist perspective to the extreme situationist perspective. I see at least

four identifiable points along that continuum. Each is outlined below.

Trait-Like Communication Competence. This point on the continuum represents communication competence from the traitist perspective. A person who has trait-like communication competence is generally competent in communication across contexts, receivers, and time. The person who is competent in an interview with a prospective employeer, will also be reasonably competent when presenting a speech to a group of professionals or interacting with a member of the opposite sex in a social situation. In contrast, people who lack trait-like competence are generally incompetent in communication across contexts, receivers, and time. They not only give poor speeches but they also are inept in social conversations. Such people are seen as retaining their level of competence over long periods of time in the absence of substantial training in communication or some type of traumatic experience.

Exactly how large a proportion of the population might be described as trait-like competent or trait-like incompetent remains an unanswered empirical question. In the absence of solid data, I suspect somewhere around ten to twenty percent of the population falls in each category. This suspicion is based solely on the assumption that communication competence is distributed normally in the population. If my suspicion is correct, 60 to 80 percent of the population would not be able to be classified as trait-like competent or incompetent. These individuals would be classified as competent under some circumstances and not under others. The remaining points on my theoretical continuum suggest circumstances which may bear on such a classification.

Context-Based Communication Competence. A person who has context-based communication competence is generally competent in communication within a given type of context across receivers and time. Such a person may lack competence in another context, or even all other contexts. Richmond and I (McCroskey &

Richmond, 1980) advanced a crude context typology which can be illustrative here. We suggested that most oral communication can be classified as public speaking, speaking in meetings or classes, speaking in small groups, and speaking in dyads.

Employing the typology, then, a person could have context-based communication competence in speaking in dyads but lack competence in public speaking. Of course, the reverse could also be true. Course offerings in contemporary communication departments (such as public speaking, small group communication, organizational communication, intercultural communication, and interpersonal communication) suggest widespread recognition of variations in the need for communication training (hence lack of competence) based on communication context. We presume that such training may help the individual overcome a lack of communication competence in a given context.

Receiver-Based Communication Competence. A person who has receiver-based communication competence is generally competent in communication with a given receiver or group of receivers across contexts and time. Such a person may lack competence with any other receiver or group of receivers.

While we may think of receivers as falling in broad categories such as friends, acquaintances, and strangers, for our purposes here such categories may be too broad. A person may be communicatively competent with one acquaintance, for example, but incompetent with another. Most of us know someone with whom we feel we have difficulty communicating. Another person may seem to be one with whom we can communicate easily. In both instances, the context is irrelevant--we can communicate easily or with great difficulty whether it be in a dyadic context, a group context, or whatever.

Broad-based communication training may help people to become more communicatively competent with more receivers or groups of receivers. However, specific training relating to the unique differences between receivers and groups

of receivers may be expected to be much more helpful.

Situational Communication Competence. A person who has situational communication competence is competent in a given context, with a given receiver or group of receivers, at a specific time. The individual may or may not be communicatively competent in any other context, with any other receiver or receivers, or at any other time.

This point on our continuum represents the most extreme situationist position. There is no generality whatsoever in an individual's level of communication competence. Training to increase communication competence at this point on the continuum must take into account all of the relevant variables in a given communication situation. Such training would not be expected to generalize to other situations where any of the relevant variables were different.

A Final Word

I have attempted in this presentation to outline some of the things that one should take into consideration when approaching the study of communication competence. There is no one way to study communication competence. Rather, there are several very different, yet potentially very useful, vantage points from which one may approach this area of study. I seems to me that two choices are critical for the aspiring communication competence researcher.

First, one must decide what kind of competence is to be studied. Shall it be knowledge, performance, or effectiveness? Whatever choice is made, that choice should be made clear to the reader of the research report. This is the only way I see that we can ever extricate ourselves from the presently confused state of research reports in the area. Competence researchers are not all studying the same thing, nor need they. But the researcher is obligated to put the kind of competence he/she is studying into perspective and distinguish it from the kinds others are studying.

Second, one must decide what level of competence is to be studied. Shall it be trait-like, context-based, receiver-based, or situational? Again, all are worthy of study. But the choice of which is studied must be made clear to the consumers of the research.

By this point you may have asked yourself why this presentation was entitled "A trait perspective on communication competence." The answer is that was the title John Daly gave me. I would have prefered "A Paradigmatically Shifty Perspective on Communication Competence." But John wouldn't hear of it.

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